

The Influence of Perceived Inconsistency in Communication of Politicians on Trust in Government in the Netherlands.

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Abstract

Political trust is of high importance for stable and legitimate democracies such as the Netherlands. Due to the digital era, political communication takes place across many different platforms, where information can seem inconsistent to citizens. This thesis aims to research the influence of perceived inconsistency in political communication on political trust in the Netherlands. While political trust has already been widely discussed in the literature, the influence of perceived inconsistency is underexplored. This thesis contributes to filling this gap. A quantitative survey (N=142) has been conducted among Dutch citizens. The results show that citizens who perceive contradictory messaging depending on either the platform, such as inconsistency between parliamentary debates and talk shows on TV, or over time, for example, before and after the elections, report lower levels of political trust. Political trust is also significantly and negatively influenced by the perceived competence of the leader and this has a stronger effect than perceived inconsistency. The other independent and control variables, age, gender, income, education, quality of policy, efficiency of public services and the media are not significant. The independent variables economic situation and corruption had to be dropped from the data analysis due to a low Cronbach Alpha. Limitations of this thesis are a relatively low number of respondents and the fact that only one question is used to measure the dependent variable political trust. During the next research more attention ought to be given to the operationalization and finding scales for the survey that are relevant to the country and time that is being researched. This thesis ends with several recommendations, such as politicians appointing a communication specialist who ensures consistency in political messaging so that political trust in society will increase.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A high trust in government is critical for ensuring legitimacy and stability of democratic institutions. When political trust is high, citizens are more likely to comply with laws, actively participate in democratic processes and accept the election outcomes (Levi & Stoker, 2000). In the Netherlands, political trust has been declining for the last few years. Many Dutch citizens feel that politicians are not listening to them and that problems in society are not being solved. Only 43% of the people still feel positively about the Dutch government (SCP, 2025). The numbers are alarming, considering the Netherlands is viewed as a democratic and well-functioning country (Rijksoverheid, 2025). A potential factor that can have an impact on political trust is the consistency of political messaging. A few decades ago people used to read one newspaper or listen to one radio broadcast per day. Today, digital communication, such as social media platforms and news outlets, is rapid and used by almost everyone in society. Political news, debates, and other communication are updated twenty-four hours a day (Moulton, 2024). Through this communication citizens can be exposed to contradictory messages from politicians. An example of such inconsistency is Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch political party, winning the election with the promise to get rid of the deductible for the health care costs. His party ends up voting against getting rid of the deductible (NOS, 2024).

This thesis aims to answer the following main research question: What is the influence of perceived inconsistency in communication of politicians on trust in government in the Netherlands? The goal of this research is to test the theoretical relationship between perceived political communication consistency and political trust in the Netherlands by conducting a survey among Dutch citizens. Furthermore, other variables, such as perceived leader competence and quality of policy, will also be tested.

Sub-questions

1. What is political trust?
2. What does the literature say about perceived inconsistency and other factors influencing political trust
3. How do these factors hypothetically relate to one another?
4. How do these factors influence political trust in the Netherlands?

Reading guide

The introduction will first establish the research context and academic and social relevance. Chapter 2 will review the relevant literature and concepts, followed by Chapter 3, which

outlines the methodology employed. Chapters 4 will present the results of the study, and chapter 5 will discuss the implications and conclusions drawn from the findings. Chapter 6 will reflect on the findings and discuss them. Chapter 7 will provide recommendations for policy makers and the media and give research directions for future research.

Relevance

This thesis will contribute to the academic debate and information on political trust and public communication by researching the relation between message consistency and trust in government. To the existing literature I add the messaging consistency dimension for the Netherlands with a focus on communication through different platforms and over time, which is an underexplored area. Previous work has often focussed on actual measured consistency, while this thesis focuses on perceived inconsistency. Even though political trust has already been widely discussed, the role of perceived inconsistency in political communication has been underexplored and thus a gap is identified. The outcomes are relevant for Dutch government officials as it will shed light on the trust in government at the moment. Increasingly, the level of trust and the satisfaction citizens have in government is associated with good governance. The more trust and satisfaction, the better the quality of governance is assumed (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003, p. 329). Furthermore, this studies methodological approach provides a deeper understanding of political trust in the digital-era. This thesis aims to show whether perceived consistency or inconsistency leads to an increase or decline in political trust. The findings that will be proposed in this thesis can elevate strategies for public officials to be more aware of their inconsistency on different platforms. Furthermore, much research is focussed on the United States, while this thesis sheds light on the situation in the Netherlands.

There is also social relevance to this paper. There are elections almost every year in the Netherlands, whether that is on a regional, national or European level. Before citizens go and vote, politicians should be made aware if they are perceived as consistent or not in their communication. So they can alter their communication style when necessary. It is in the interest of the public that there is a high trust in the government, because this increases the legitimacy of democratic institutions and that there is no outcry for public resistance (Levi and Stoker, 2000). In conclusion, this study aims to add to the understanding of how political communication shapes the perception and trust of the public.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework first the concept of trust will be discussed and then consistency.

Chapter 2.1 Political trust

The concept of trust in government and politics has been widely discussed within academic dialogue. Trust in government and politicians is a bedrock of democratic governance, shaping public compliance, policy legitimacy, and governing system stability (Hetherington, 1998; Levi & Stoker, 2000). It captures the extent to which people perceive that governmental institutions and political actors are effective, just, and act in alignment with the public interest (Easton, 1975; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). To grasp the fluctuation of trust in government an analysis of its conceptual foundations is required. A distinction is made between different sorts of political trust by scholars. There is institutional trust, which is focussed on the trust in government institutions, such as the parliament (Norris, 2011). There is also interpersonal political trust, which is focussed on individual politicians or government officials (Hardin, 2006). In this thesis, I will focus mostly on trust in government institutions rather than individual politicians.

Weatherford (1992, p. 150) recognizes that trust is a multi-level concept, which are concepts that can be relevant in research for both individuals, but also for nations or organisations. Trust can be defined as a contested term (Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 476). Trusting someone can mean making yourself vulnerable to another person, group or institution that has the possibility to betray you. An example is citizens trusting the government during a pandemic to fight the disease and saving lives by implementing certain policies. Trust can be conceptualized as a dichotomous judgment, meaning a person either trusts or distrusts. It can also be conceptualized in a graded manner, meaning a person trusts or distrusts to a certain degree. Trust judgments lead to certain behaviors or actions by individuals. For example, distrust can lead to disobliging behavior to the other individual or institution and a harmed relationship.

The definition of political trust that will be used in this paper is defined by Listhaug (1990, p. 358) as "trust in government (or synonymously political confidence and support) is a summary judgment that the system is responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny." Easton (1965, chapters 11-13, 17-21; 1975) has made a distinction between specific and diffuse political support. Specific support is the satisfaction citizens have with the short-term output of the government and the performance of political authorities. Diffuse support is the attitude of the public "toward regime-level political objects

regardless of performance'', thus more focussed on long-term legitimacy. The most prominent dimensions of political trust include: integrity, competence, fairness and responsiveness (Citrin & Muste, 1999). Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003, p. 333) note that in the case of low or high levels of trust in government, the context is very important. Certain cultures have a natural tendency to distrust their government and what political trust means can vary per political culture.

Political trust can change due to many different factors. Influences that affect trust have been identified by several scholars. Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003, p. 337) identified that citizens have more political trust when public services are efficient and responsive. Citrin and Green (1986) concluded that political trust is strongly influenced by the characteristics and the functioning of the person in charge such as the president, or in the case of the Netherlands, the prime-minister. Miller and Borrelli (1991) have found that policy considerations are also of relevance. When citizens agree with the policies that are pushed by the government, then their trust increases. They are less trustful when they do not agree with policy issues. Furthermore, the quality of the policy and the economic situation of a country also influences trust. When political scandals, crises or corruption occur this also impacts political trust (Dalton, 2005, p. 133). The media also plays a large role when it comes to political trust. When the media talks very negatively about the government or certain political actors or institutions, then political trust declines (Patterson, 1993). Moreover, identity, age, race, education, gender, etc. also influences how much trust someone has in political institutions (Abramson, 1983). All the factors mentioned and possibly more can help account for the variation in political trust across various contexts, time periods and countries.

I will now look into how political trust has been measured in other research. Most of the research on trust in the government depends on public opinion surveys done by larger organisations, such as the European Social Survey (ESS) and the OECD. These organisations ask questions such as ''On a scale from 1 to 5, how much trust do you have in the government to do what is right?'' This is a direct measure, because trust is self-reported. There are researchers who adopt indirect methods, as surveys can have a low reliability, examples of this are observations, lab experiments and trust games (Bauer and Freitag, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, qualitative measures are also used to measure trust in government, such as interviews, focus groups and discourse analysis. Van Riet and Van Stekelenburg (2022) have researched political trust by performing a content analysis. They concluded that uncivil behavior by politicians on social media, but also on other platforms, leads to a decline

in political trust. They describe incivility as being disrespectful to for example a political opponent.

In conclusion, political trust is essential for democratic governance, shaping public compliance, policy legitimacy, and governing system stability (Hetherington, 1998; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Trust is a multi-level concept and can be measured as binary or graded judgment. Measuring political trust shows how much confidence or support citizens have in the government and political institutions and leaders to act in the interest of the public in a fair and competent way. There are different factors that have been proven to influence political trust, such as, the efficiency of public services, policy considerations, the characteristics of the prime-ministers, uncivil behavior of politicians on social media, age, gender, etc. To these factors I add the dimension of perceived consistency in communication of government officials.

Chapter 2.2 Consistency and inconsistency

In the fields of public administration and communication theory, consistency is seen as a key element of credibility. Consistency occurs, for example, when what is said on social media aligns with parliamentary debate and vice versa or on TV talk shows, in the news, etc.

(Chadwick, 2013). I will first distinguish between perceived and actual inconsistency.

Perceived inconsistency is the extent to which citizens believe politicians are inconsistent and actual inconsistency is the measured difference between discourse on social media and parliamentary debates. Actual inconsistency is usually measured through content analysis, where messages are checked on different platforms over time. In this thesis there will only be a focus on perceived inconsistency. This is measured through surveys using a Likert-scale to assess whether citizens perceive political actors to be inconsistent. This thesis argues that perceived inconsistency is more important than actual inconsistency to measure political trust, as trust is also based on perception. Perceived inconsistency depends on the framing of the media, interpretations and biases that people have. It can be that political actors who are very inconsistent are perceived as consistent by citizens who have not noticed the contradictions. The other way around is also possible. This is important to note when discussing perceived inconsistency, because political trust is not shaped by measuring objective behavior (Hetherington, 2005).

In public administration, Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003, p. 336) associate consistency with transparency, accountability and legitimacy. Clear and consistent political communication is a key part of good governance and leads to less confusion about policies and to a better relationship between citizens and the government. It is argued that

consistency in communication is part of public accountability, where people “say what they do and do what they say.” This is fundamental for an institution to govern effectively and for outsiders to be able to supervise its performance. Furthermore, consistency leads to more predictability. When governmental institutions or political actors frequently change their messaging or contradict themselves, it can be interpreted as a lack of ability or as manipulation. This, again, leads to less trust in the government (Bovens, et al., 2014).

In communication theory consistency and inconsistency is widely discussed. An example of inconsistency is saying that you are against smoking because it causes cancers, but then you smoke yourself or as a political actor you do not vote for policy against smoking. According to O’Keefe (2002, p. 272) this dissonant, or also known as inconsistent, behavior of people leads others to feel uncomfortable. In general people wish to avoid inconsistency or try to reduce it. This is called the “dissonance theory” and one of the applications yields that being consistent in communication and behavior can lead to more people agreeing with your viewpoints. Another application is that people who are exposed to inconsistent communication or behavior arouse dissonance, which disturbs the harmony between people (Festinger, 1957). In framing theory, inconsistent messaging is also discussed. Entman (1993, p. 56) argues that when information is framed in an inconsistent way by political actors, the perceived consistency can still be upheld if the primary values remain the same. On the other hand, if the primary values change without justification, then the inconsistency can be seen as manipulative.

In conclusion, consistency in political messaging is seen as an important element in the current academic literature to ensure accountability, good governance and legitimacy. Perceived and actual consistency can both be measured empirically, however, this study will only focus on perceived inconsistency. This thesis emphasizes that perceived inconsistency is subjective and does not reflect whether or not political actors are actually inconsistent or not. It is precisely the interpretation of inconsistency that influences how much trust someone has in the government and not the factual inconsistency.

Chapter 2.3 Conceptual framework

From the theoretical framework two key concepts and several controlling variables emerge. The key concepts are political trust, which will be the dependent variable, and perceived inconsistency, which will be the independent variable. The definition of political trust that will be used in this paper is defined by Listhaug (1990, p. 358) as “trust in government (or synonymously political confidence and support) is a summary judgment that the system is

responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny.” The definition of perceived inconsistency is the extent to which citizens believe politicians are inconsistent.

As explain the theoretical framework, variables that are already known to have an influence on political trust are: efficient and responsive public services (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003, p. 337), the characteristics of the person in charge (Citrin and Green, 1986), agreement with policy and the quality of policy (Miller and Borrelli, 1991), the economic situation, scandals (Dalton, 2005, p. 133), and the media (Patterson, 1993). These will be the variables that I control for, with which I want to isolate the effect of perceived inconsistency on political trust by accounting for the influence of these other variables that have already been proven to influence political trust. By controlling for these variables I can make certain that any effects that will be observed are due to perceived inconsistency and due to these other factors. Moreover, identity, age, income, education, gender, etc. also influences how much trust someone has in political institutions (Abramson, 1983). Hence, I also ask the respondents for this information. These are the control variables.

In the figure below you can find a visual representation of the relationship between the factors that influence political trust. For each variable a hypothesis is created.

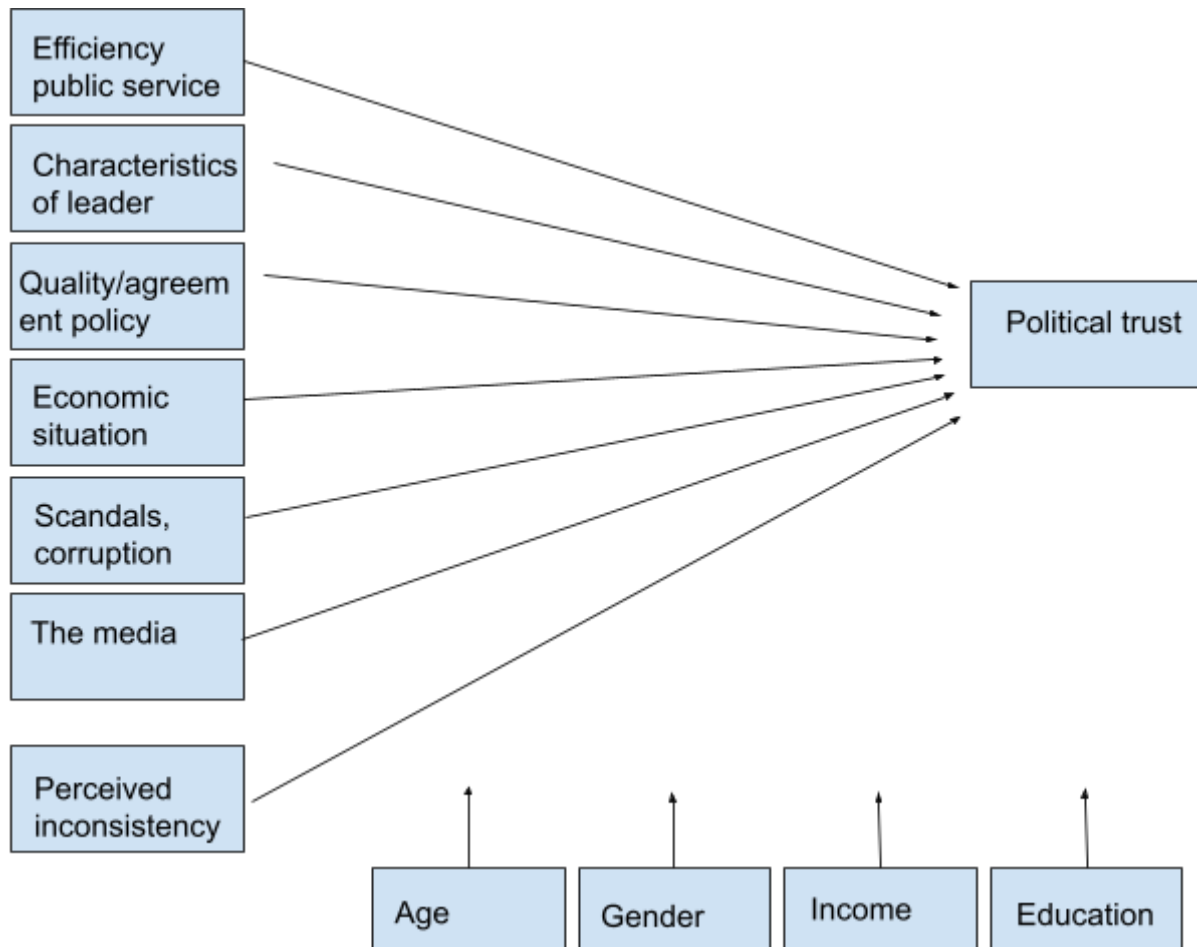


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Hypothesis

H1: Citizens who perceive inconsistency in communication by political actors have a lower level of political trust

H2: Citizens who perceive public services as inefficient and unresponsive have a lower level of political trust.

H3: Citizens who perceive political leaders as incompetent, dishonest and incapable will have a lower level of political trust.

H4: Citizens who disagree with implemented policies and perceive them as low-quality will have a lower level of political trust.

H5: Citizens who perceive the current economic situation negatively will have a lower level of political trust

H6: Citizens who perceive political scandals or corruption will show lower levels of political trust.

H7: Citizens who are exposed to negative framing by the media about the government will show lower levels of political trust.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This thesis adopts a quantitative approach. A survey research is conducted and then the data from the survey will be analyzed statistically. The survey questions are close-ended and standardized for all respondents and the hypotheses and relationships are tested through independent, dependent and control variables. These are all features of quantitative research. A survey was deemed to be the most suitable method to answer the research question of this thesis, because a survey allows to capture the perceived evaluation of citizens. Through a survey it can be measured how citizens evaluate the inconsistency in political messaging. Furthermore, to measure political trust, surveys are a standard method in the fields of political science and public administration (Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies, 2015, p. 584). Lastly, by doing a survey the opportunity was created to measure several variables, through which theoretical relationships can be tested.

Through the survey I will measure the effect of perceived messaging consistency on political trust. Political trust will be the dependent variable. I will account for sociodemographic variables, such as age, education, political interest, to control the relationship between perceived inconsistency and political trust. I have chosen these, because as shown in the theoretical framework, it has been proven in previous research that they affect political trust. I will measure perceived consistency by using a five-point Likert scale. An example is "Politicians often contradict themselves when speaking on different platforms," with responses varying from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In order to measure political trust I will use established scales from political science research.

The survey research will have a minimum of 140 respondents, as the aim is to have 20 respondents per independent variable. The participants have been recruited online through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Whatsapp and Telegram chat groups, student chat groups, forums, such as Dutch Political communities on Reddit, and also by asking friends and families to send it to their networks. The survey has been executed between the 5th and 29th of May 2025. It has been aimed to reach as many people as possible with different socio-demographic features to aim for variation. As will be mentioned in the limitations, this comes with its challenges.

I measure political trust on 4 items. To measure political trust I will use the questions used in the well-received research from Hetherington (1998, p. 804). These questions are well-received and known for accurately measuring political trust. Since his research is

focussed on Washington, the United States, I will change the location mentioned in the survey questions. The operationalization can be found in Appendix A.

The data that I will receive through the survey will be statistically analyzed using SPSS software. I will present the key variables by doing a descriptive statistical analysis. Then, I will execute correlational and regression analysis and scale construction, to assess the main research question and determine the strength as well as the direction of the correspondence among perceived inconsistency and political trust.

Limitations

Several limitations occur while conducting this research. One of the limitations is the possibility that people only follow politicians on one platform, such as social media, and not on other platforms, which makes it hard to be aware of inconsistency. Furthermore, it is possible that the participants perceived inconsistency or consistency is influenced by bias or impaired memories. Since my research relies on self-reported perceptions, it can influence the accuracy of the perceived inconsistency and political trust. It can also be cognitively demanding to recognize someone being inconsistent, this may be difficult for some people. Another limitation is that politics are a sensitive topic for some people. Someone may recognize inconsistencies from the party or politician they support, but they may downplay it or choose to forget about it and not mention it in the survey. Moreover, I am not researching the actual consistency of political actors through a content analysis, therefore there is no verification of whether the perceived consistency or inconsistency is correct. Another limitation is that with a minimum of 140 respondents, the sample size may not be entirely representative of the Dutch citizens. This can be a limit to the generalizability of my findings. Lastly, because of reasons mentioned above, I might only receive opinions on inconsistency from a politically engaged group and people who have access to and are familiar with the internet, this is also not representative of Dutch society.

Ethical consideration

To take into account ethical considerations I will inform respondents about the purpose of the research I conduct and what participating in the survey means for them. Furthermore, I will explain how the collected data is used and explicitly state that participating in the survey is voluntary. I will make sure that data is collected and stored in a way that guarantees that respondents remain anonymous. I will follow the GDPR regulations and all data will be deleted after completion of the thesis project. Lastly, to take into account ethical considerations I will phrase the survey questions in an unbiased and neutral way to prevent

leading questions. I do not want the respondents to feel they were pushed into a certain direction, the data should reflect their own perceptions.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Descriptive statistics

In table 1 the descriptives, Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) are displayed, together with bivariate correlations between the independent variables and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF). The Cronbach Alpha for perceived inconsistency, efficiency, media, policy and leadership are all above .70 and therefore acceptable.

The questions for the dependent variable political trust 2, 3 and 4 have been removed from this thesis. Even though the question set was taken from a prominent research that is widely used and a validated scale (Hetherington, 1998), the questions lack internal consistency and this could not be fixed in any way. The first question has been chosen to stay as it is the one closest to political trust and closest to a normal distribution, hence more valid. Using only one question to measure political trust has its downsides. There is bias, as it is possible respondents have misinterpreted the question or there is an individual variation in understanding. Furthermore, political trust is a multidimensional variable, with many aspects, which is not captured by only using one question. This methodological limitation is acknowledged and will be factored in while interpreting results. In the reflection I will explain further what this means for the results of my thesis.

The variables Economy and Corruption are dropped from this thesis, because the Cronbach alpha is too low, this means the questions lack internal consistency and this can lead to unreliable results and a low validity of my conclusion. The Cronbach Alpha for Economy is 0.532 and after removing the first question it increased to 0.563. The Cronbach Alpha for Corruption, after reverse coding the first and second question is .438. Both are below the threshold of .70 for an acceptable reliability. I will also elaborate on this in the reflection.

From table 1 it can be said that the sample is middle-aged, as the mean is 43.15 with a Standard Deviation of 15.642. The youngest person to fill it in is 19 and the oldest is 80. For Gender the mean is 1.63 with a standard deviation of .483, as 2=male, it is closer to male than female. So it can be concluded that there are more male respondents. 3=non-binary and 4=other have not been used by any of the respondents. For education the mean is 3.85 with a standard deviation of .940. 1=no education and 5=very highly educated, so the respondents are relatively highly educated. For income the mean is 7.06, with a standard deviation of 3.480. 1=very low income and 11=very high income, which means there is a moderate to high distribution of income. For the dependent variable Political Trust the mean is 3.45, with a standard deviation of .720. Since 1=always and 5=never, the respondents are

leaning towards not trusting the government or only sometimes. For perceived inconsistency the mean is 3.58 and the standard deviation is .485. 1=no inconsistency perceived and 5= much inconsistency perceived, which means that there is a relative amount of consistency perceived. For perceived efficiency the mean is 3.58 and the standard deviation is .73. 1=very efficient and 5=very inefficient, as the mean is closer to 5, a relative amount of inefficiency is perceived. For the perceived competence of leadership the mean is 3.03 and the standard deviation is .702. The mean is closest to 3, which is equal to neutral, so it appears respondents are impartial on this topic. For trust in media the mean is 3.15 with a standard deviation of .713. Again, the mean is closest to 3, which is equal to neutral, hence the respondents are neutral on this topic. For perceived quality of policy the mean is 2.51 and the standard deviation is .817. As 1=not happy with policy and 5=very happy with policy, it is the case that respondents are neutral, but more leaning towards unhappy with policy.

	CA	M(SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	VIF
Gender		1.63 (.483)							
Age		43.15 (15.64 2)							
Income		7.06 (3.48)							
Education		3.85 (.94)							
Political Trust		3.45 (.72)	1						
Inconsistency	.742	3.5815 (.4859 1)	.453***	1					1.328
Efficiency	.710	3.0798 (.7308 7)	-.145	-.150	1				1.081
Leader	.723	3.0370 (.7026 7)	-.506***	-.373***	.247**	1			1.551
Media	.806	3.1549 (.7131 1)	-.105	-.161	.055	.018	1		1.043
Policy	.847	2.5117	-.447***	-.443***	.223**	.569***	-.027	1	1.660

		(.8171 4)							
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Table 1: Descriptives (*P<0.05; ** P<0.01; ***P<0.001), Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD).

The model assumptions for a multiple regression analysis are met, since the correlations between the independent variables and low VIF scores (all well below 5), means there is no problem with multicollinearity. The Durbin-Watson statistic is 1.793, indicating that the residuals are independent and that there is no evidence of autocorrelation. This suggests that the assumption of independent errors in the linear regression model is met.

I will now check if the relation between dependent and independent variables is linear. I have chosen to do it graphically and I will construct a series of graphs in which the relation between dependent and independent variables are plotted. The Scatterplot Matrix confirms the findings of the regression analysis. Strong predictors of political trust are perceived inconsistency and competence of leaders and show visible trends. Weak predictors of political trust, which are efficiency, media and policy, do not. Multicollinearity is low, however, this has already been confirmed with VIFs. There is no indication for nonlinear relationships. The histogram resembles a normal curve. The errors are evenly distributed around the predicted value, and the model does not seem to be biased or skewed. The P-P shows the residuals are normally distributed. The scatterplot of standardized residuals does not reveal major issues with homoscedasticity. The assumption of normality of residuals is met. This strengthens the validity of the model.

Inferential statistics

I now inspect the explained variance. The model with only control variables explains 1.9%. But if I add the independent variables the explained variance increases to 37,5%, which is a satisfactory result. The adjusted R square corrects positive bias to provide a value that would be expected in the population (Laerd, p. 16). The adjusted R square is less than the value for R square.

Model 1 produces a non-significant F statistic implying that none of the variables in model 1 correlate with the dependent variable. This model does not explain a significant amount of variance in political trust.

- Model 1 = $F(4, 137) = .663, p = .618 \rightarrow$ not significant.

Model 2 does produce a significant F statistic, implying that the added variables significantly improve the model. The model explains a significant amount of variance in political trust when the independent variables are added.

- Model 2 = $F(9, 132) = 8.815$, $p < .001 \rightarrow$ very significant.

In table 2 the coefficients from the regression analysis are displayed. In model 1 all the p-values are $> .05$, which means none of the sociodemographic variables significantly predict political trust. Model 2 shows that perceived inconsistency and competence of leadership are both significant.. Perceived inconsistency is significant at $.001$, which means that a higher perceived consistency leads to higher political trust. I can be 95% confident that the true value of the slope coefficient is between the $.160$ and $.626$. Leadership is significant at $< .001$, which means that when a leader is perceived competent it leads to a higher political trust. This is the strongest effect. The beta is $-.349$, so there is a negative relationship. The lower the perceived competence, the lower the trust. I can be 95% confident that the true value of the slope coefficient is between the $-.537$ and $-.179$. Efficiency, media, policy and all the sociodemographic variables are above $.05$ and are thus not significant. That means that age, gender, income, education, perceived efficiency of government services, trust in media and the perceived quality of policy does not significantly predict political trust in this model .

Political trust is significantly and positively influenced by perceived inconsistency and negatively influenced by the perceived competence of the leader.

Model		Beta
1	(Constant)	
	Age	.027
	Gender	-.065
	Education	.053
	Income	-.116
2	(Constant)	
	Age	.127
	Gender	-.099
	Education	.040

	Income	-.041
	Inconsistency	.265***
	Efficiency	.030
	Leader	-.349***
	Media	-.063
	Policy	-.144

Table 2: Regression results with standardized coefficients (β) (* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$)

Now that the data has been analysed, a new conceptual framework adjusted to the findings will be discussed. Several hypotheses were created based on the existing literature, these will be revisited. The first hypothesis has been proved and thus can remain the same: Citizens who perceive inconsistency in communication by political actors have a lower level of political trust. The second hypothesis, citizens who perceive public services as inefficient and unresponsive have a lower level of political trust, has not been proved due to it not being significant. The third hypothesis has been proved and thus can remain the same: Citizens who perceive political leaders as incompetent, dishonest and incapable will have a lower level of political trust. The fourth hypothesis, citizens who disagree with implemented policies and perceive them as low-quality will have a lower level of political trust, is not significant. The fifth hypothesis, citizens who perceive the current economic situation negatively will have a lower level of political trust, has not been proved due to a low Cronbach Alpha. This is the same for the sixth hypothesis: Citizens who perceive political scandals or corruption will show lower levels of political trust. The seventh hypothesis, citizens who are exposed to negative framing by the media about the government will show lower levels of political trust, has not been proved due to it being not significant. New hypotheses are created based on the findings of this thesis.

H1: Citizens who perceive inconsistency in communication by political actors have a lower level of political trust.

H2: Citizens who perceive political leaders as incompetent, dishonest and incapable will have a lower level of political trust.

H3: Due to a fragmented and fast-moving media environment, short-term impressions, such as messaging consistency, are now more important than long-term performance, such as quality of policy.

H4: The perceived competence of a leader has a bigger impact on political trust than perceived inconsistency in political messaging.

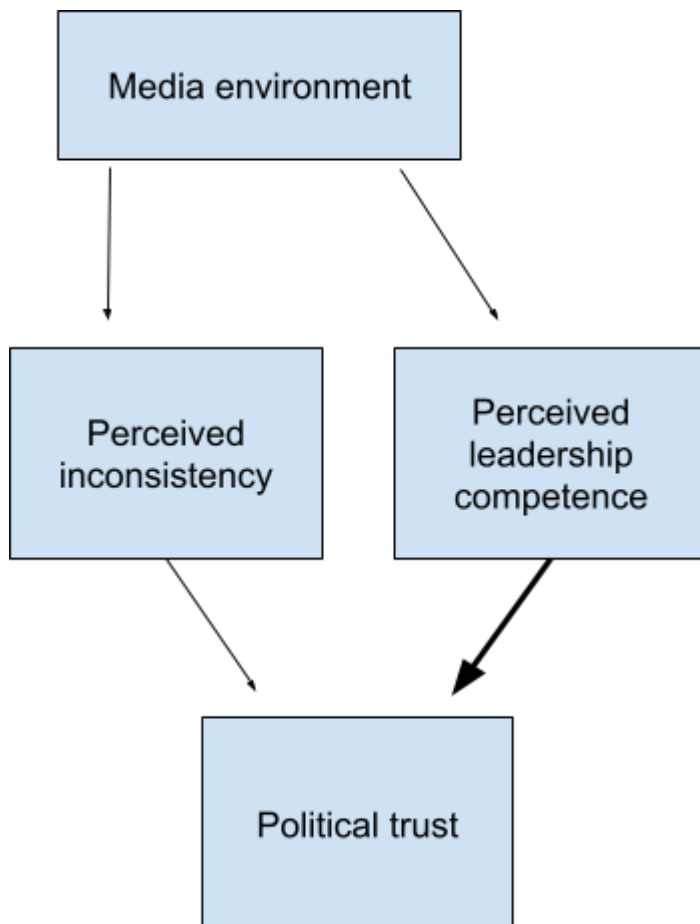


Figure 2: conceptual framework

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to research the influence of perceived inconsistency in political communication on political trust in the Netherlands. Literature on political trust and communication consistency have been explored and built on. Survey data has been collected and analysed to measure the perception and attitudes of Dutch citizens, which leads to a more nuanced understanding of how inconsistency in communication shapes political legitimacy.

The main research question of this thesis will now be directly answered: What is the influence of perceived inconsistency in communication of politicians on trust in government in the Netherlands? The findings display that political trust is significantly and positively influenced by perceived inconsistency. Citizens who perceive contradictory messaging depending on either the platform, such as inconsistency between parliamentary debates and talk shows on TV, or over time, for example, before and after the elections, report lower levels of political trust. This lines up with the theoretical assumptions that consistency indicates reliability and accountability, which is crucial for trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political trust is also significantly and negatively influenced by the perceived competence of the leader and this has a stronger effect than perceived inconsistency. Citizens who perceive the Dutch prime-minister as competent in handling national issues, trustworthy and acting in the best interest of the public, report a higher level of political trust. The other independent and control variables, age, gender, income, education, quality of policy, efficiency of public services and the media are not significant. The independent variables economic situation and corruption had to be dropped from the data analysis due to a low Cronbach Alpha.

As discussed in the introduction there is a gap in the current research. Political trust and many of its influencing factors, such as economy and policy, have already been widely discussed. However, the role of perceived inconsistency in political communication in the Netherlands has been underexplored. There is little research on how the perception of citizens in what politicians or government officials say on different platforms influences their political trust. I will now discuss whether or not this gap has been filled. This thesis has contributed to filling this gap, even though there are some important limitations that need to be acknowledged, those are discussed in the reflection. Furthermore, this thesis can help contribute to more trust in government institutions, which leads to a better quality of government and good governance (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003, p. 329). Consequently, a survey has been executed among Dutch citizens, which adds empirical insight into how they perceive inconsistency in communication and about their current trust

in political institutions. This thesis adds to the literature by introducing perceived inconsistency as a political trust factor. Previous work has often focussed on actual measured consistency, while this thesis focuses on perceived inconsistency. Furthermore, much research is focussed on the United States, while this thesis sheds light on the situation in the Netherlands. Lastly, this thesis has helped to rank different trust factors, namely perceived leadership competence and inconsistency.

In conclusion, the results of this thesis have shown that perceived inconsistency does influence political trust, however perceived leader competence has a stronger effect. This leads to this thesis contributing to the identified gap in research and adding new knowledge to the existing literature.

Chapter 6: Reflection and discussion

Several challenges and flaws in the research design have come forward while writing this thesis. During the phase of data gathering, it was difficult to reach many respondents for my survey because I lived abroad while researching a topic about the Netherlands. This meant I could not go out on the street and ask people to fill in the survey. On the internet, people are hesitant to click on links from strangers, this could possibly be explained by the fact that in the last few years there has been a spike in scammers trying to get people to click on their links (NOS, 2020). An N of 142 respondents is enough to do a statistical analysis, however, the research would be more valid if it had a larger N.

Some of the statistical results do not align with the existing theory and findings of researchers. Such as, my independent variables, trust in media, policy quality and efficiency and the sociodemographic variables, are not statistically significant. This can be due to a limited sample size. The sample size of the survey is 142 respondents, which is acceptable for multiple regression analysis, however, it is relatively small. It is possible that this has reduced statistical power and has failed to notice effects that are there. Another explanation for my results not aligning with that of others is because of a different context. The sources and scales I have used for my thesis and survey come from research executed in different countries and times (Hetherington, 1998, p. 04; Miller et al., 1986, p. 537; Citrin and Green, 1986; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981, p. 159). It can be the case that Dutch respondents currently value consistency and leadership competence more than they value the influence of the media and the quality of policy. A possible explanation for why consistency is now of bigger importance than it was years ago is that people used to only read one newspaper. Now, due to the internet, there is an infinite amount of information on different platforms reachable at all times and permanently archived, such as social media, online news articles from many different channels, talk shows on television, etc. This is also known as the 24-hour news cycle (Moulton, 2024). So it does not have to be the case that there is more inconsistency, but due to all these different platforms inconsistency could be more visible and is therefore seen as important.

This has implications for older research on political trust. It does not invalidate older research, however, it might be incomplete. For example, Hetherington's (1998) research was executed in a time where media was more centralized, there was no social media and news cycles were slower. Due to these changes, the way citizens judge trustworthiness could have changed. Researchers may have to reconceptualize political trust and update its measurement tools to account for these changes.

As explained in the analysis the independent variables Economy and Corruption had to be dropped from this study due to a low Cronbach Alpha. It will now be reflected on why this is the case and what the effect on the results of this study are. The scales are not reliable and thus no conclusions can be made on how respondents feel about these two topics. The reason can be that respondents interpreted the questions differently or that I have used the scale wrongly. Also for these variables the context matters, for example, corruption is not as relevant to measure in the Netherlands. In 2024 the Netherlands was ranked 9 out of a list of 180 countries sorted on lowest corruption to highest (Transparency, 2024). This means that the Netherlands has very little corruption. It can be the case that the questions were made for a country with high corruption. The effect that dropping these two variables has for my results is that the model does not test theoretical explanations that are very influential when it comes to measuring political trust. Also, there is a limited ability in comparing the findings with other studies that have measured all the variables. Furthermore, when giving policy recommendations it must be acknowledged that certain key factors, whilst predicting political trust, are now not analyzed.

For the dependent variable political trust, the decision was made to drop three out of four items on the scale, due to a low Cronbach Alpha. Using only one question to measure the dependent variable comes with several implications for the results of this study. Ideally, complex concepts, such as political trust, are measured using several items. By using one, the benefit of internal consistency is lost, which leads to less reduction of random errors. It can be the case that respondents have misinterpreted the one question and this makes the measurement of political trust less reliable. The results of this study now only measure a small aspect of political trust, while it is a multidimensional concept with many different aspects. It needs to be taken into account, when making conclusions about political trust or policy recommendations, that only one dimension of political trust is measured. A methodological contribution is added by this thesis, as it is shown that using validated scales can come with its challenges.

The results of this thesis have shown that the perceived competence and characteristics of a leader have a bigger impact on political trust than perceived inconsistency. This means that, even though consistency in messaging matters, citizens place more value on the perceived capabilities of a leader. An example of this is the president of the United States, Donald Trump. He is known for being very inconsistent (Green, 2025), but still he continues to win electoral power. He is seen as a competent leader by his voters, as he speaks up for what they believe is right. People seem to want action more than they want consistency. This is

important to take into account for the western world looking forward. Politicians and government officials have a lot to win if they can control how they are perceived by the public.

In conclusion, reflecting on what has been said so far, during the next research more attention ought to be given to the operationalization and finding scales for the survey that are relevant to the country and time that is being researched. Furthermore, putting in more effort and time to increase the sample size is of importance.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

Policy recommendations

In this section several recommendations will be put forward which can help maintain or rebuild political trust, whilst being feasible and low-cost. There is a focus on transparency and accountability, which is very important for consistency (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003, p. 336).

The results of this thesis suggest that politicians and government officials should consider carefully how their communication is perceived across different platforms and over time. As this thesis only measures perceived inconsistency, remarks about actual inconsistency cannot be made. However, in order to prevent perceived inconsistency it is recommended to aim to fully prevent inconsistency from occurring. Politicians and government officials ought to ensure that their communication on social media, television, and in parliamentary debates are consistent in tone, content, and position. It is recommended to consult and/or appoint a communication specialist and coordinator to check the consistency in messages before it is outed to the public. If a policy or position does change, it is important to explain why. Transparency could prevent perceived inconsistency. Furthermore, it is recommended to speak clearly and use simple language. The use of very technical jargon can lead to confusion and thus lead to perceived inconsistency. Another recommendation is to periodically measure the inconsistency perceived by Dutch citizens through surveys or other feedback tools. By doing this, ministries, government officials or political parties can analyse their progress and see where they have to improve.

Due to what has been discussed in the reflection about the perceived competence of a leader being more important than perceived inconsistency to measure political trust, this thesis recommends to politicians and government officials to often communicate their achievements and successes in regards to their policy choices. This shows competence and effectiveness to the public. Furthermore, when it is needed to increase political trust in society, it is recommended to appoint a leader with a strong presence that values integrity, communicates clearly, has vision and is respected. This can pertain to the leader of the country, a ministry or a political party, etc.

As discussed in the reflection the media landscape has changed over the last decades. Therefore, this thesis also addresses the media in terms of recommendations. It is now the case that in many talkshows, debates or other public moments for politicians and government officials, they are able to say whatever they want, without being factchecked. In

the United States it is a recent phenomena that political debates are live factchecked (Gold, 2024). This is also recommended for the media in the Netherlands. If the Dutch public is able to see or read which politicians or government officials are telling lies or are contradicting themselves with what they have said before, citizens can make better informed decisions during the elections. It also hopefully makes politicians and government officials think twice before telling a lie or contradiction. This can lead to less perceived and actual inconsistency and thus more political trust in Dutch society. Furthermore, journalists should hold politicians and government officials accountable when inconsistencies in messaging occur. It is newsworthy to write about political statements made across different platforms, such as debates and social media.

Future research directions

For future researchers it is of interest to research the actual inconsistency with perceived inconsistency in political messaging. This ought to be done by executing a content analysis of posts on different social media platforms, speech in parliamentary debate, tv shows and interviews. First respondents are asked about their political trust and perceived inconsistency of political communication. Then, actual measured inconsistency is shown and political trust is measured again. The research question would be: How does the effect of perceived inconsistency on political trust differ from the effect of actual inconsistency in political communication?

Another future research direction is to compare the perceived inconsistency of political communication cross-country and its effect on political trust. Democratic countries similar to each other in economic and judicial systems could be compared, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. The same scale to measure perceived inconsistency and political trust ought to be used and it can be examined how different factors, such as populism, moderate the relationship. The research question would be: Does the effect of perceived inconsistency on political trust differ across democratic countries? Furthermore, as discussed in the reflection, there is the possibility that perceived corruption would be of interest to measure in a country with high corruption. A comparison can be made between different countries with high corruption or countries with low and high corruption.

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Appendix A: Operationalization

In the table below I translate each concept into measurable variables. To measure political trust I will use the questions used in the well-received research from Hetherington (1998, p. 804). The questions to measure perceived inconsistency I have written myself. The questions for sociodemographic factors are standard questions taken from the OECD (2024). To measure the efficiency of public services I use survey questions set forward by Andrews and Van de Walle in their paper on New Public Management and the perception of citizens. To measure the opinion of respondents on the Dutch economical situation I use questions from Kinder & Kiewiet (1981, p. 159). This is a validated academic measure used in many global surveys in political science. To measure the view people view the characteristics of the political leader or prime-minister, the work on schematic assessments of presidential candidates from Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk (1986) is used. To measure the agreement that people have with implemented policy and the quality of this policy I use questions from Citrin and Green (1986). The questions about corruption and scandals are taken from the European Commission Eurobarometer survey (2024) on corruption. To measure the influence of the media on political trust I used survey questions used by Pew Research Center (2019).

Concept	Label	Survey question
Political Trust (Hetherington, 1998, p. 804)	Trust in government	How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in the Netherlands to do what is right?
	Tax money allocation	Do you think that people in the Dutch government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes?
	Benefit of all	Would you say the Dutch government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people
	Crooked/corruption	Do you think that the people running the Dutch government are crooked?
Perceived inconsistency	Contradictory messaging	Dutch political actors often contradict themselves in their public communication
	Platform/audience shifting	Dutch politicians often change their messages depending on the audience or platform

	Difference across media	What Dutch politicians say on social media differs from what they say in parliamentary debates or talk shows on TV.
	Position shifting over time	Dutch politicians regularly change their position on issues within a short time period
	Election inconsistency	Dutch politicians say one thing before elections and another after
	Less trust due to inconsistency	When I notice inconsistencies in political communication, I lose trust in the government and its institutions
	Importance of consistency	I pay attention to whether politicians are consistent over time when forming my opinion about them.
Sociodemographic factors (OECD, 2024)	Age	What is your age?
	Gender	What is your gender?
	Income	What is your net income?
	Education	What is your education level?
Efficiency public service (Andrews & Van de Walle, 2012, p. 769)	Efficiency	Public services in the Netherlands are delivered efficiently.
	Responsiveness	When I contact public services (e.g., municipality, tax office, IND), I receive help in a timely manner.
	Responsiveness	I feel that public services respond to the needs and concerns of citizens.
Characteristics of leader (Miller et al., 1986, p. 537)	Perceived competence	The Dutch Prime Minister is competent in handling national issues.
	Perceived alignment with national interest	The Prime Minister acts in the best interest of the Dutch public.
	Trustworthiness	I trust the Prime Minister to provide clear and honest communication.
	Personal values	The personal values and behavior of the Prime Minister positively influence my trust in the government.

Quality and agreement policy (Citrin & Green, 1986)	Agreement with policy	I generally agree with the policies implemented by the Dutch government.
	Quality of policy	The Dutch government usually implements high-quality, well-thought-out policies.
	Policy outcome satisfaction	The government does a good job developing policies that help people like me.
Economic situation (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981, p. 159)	Dissatisfaction with income	How satisfied are you with the income you (and your family) have?
	Perceived Government Performance	As to the economic policy of the government - I mean steps taken to fight inflation or unemployment - would you say that the government is doing a good job, only a fair job, or a poor job?
	Business conditions	Would you say that at the present time business conditions are better or worse than they were 5 years ago?
Scandals, corruption (Europa, 2024)	Corruption	How widespread do you think the problem of corruption is in the Netherlands? (widespread, rare, there is no corruption)
	Scandals	In the past three years would you say that the amount of scandals in the Dutch government has... (increased, stayed the same, decreased, there are no scandals)
	Corruption	Do political leaders use public office for personal gain?
The media (PEW, 2019)	Trust in media	How much trust do you have in national news organizations?
	Biased media	Do you believe the media favor one side of the political spectrum?
	Trust in media	How often does the media misrepresent facts about the government or politicians?